The Key Word is “Trying”: Autistic Spectrum Disorder vs the Great Nation of Uganda

By Liv Wake, Bournemouth University Final Year

“So,” said one woman, addressing the group of play action volunteers that had gathered around my playing cards, sleep deprived brains trying to make sense of the hastily-explained rules of a game I barely remember, “what are you going to miss most about home?”

“Love island,” another woman replied confidently while making an illegal game move I elected not to draw attention to. “I know I’m only here for two weeks, but…”

There was a motley crew of volunteers gathered in Doha airport, all sporting matching yellow T-shirts and grey eye bags. Said group made various noises of ascent, before prompting the person sat next to the woman — me — for an answer.

“I hadn’t really thought about it,” I white lied, “but if I had to say one thing, I’d say running water. I’m not looking forward to cold bucket showers,” I said with a nervous laugh as I reminisced upon years of scout camps and DofE hikes. “Adam (Alex? Sam? Couldn’t tell you. I’m not good with new faces), what’ll you miss?”

He turned to me slowly, mouth agape. “What do you mean, we won’t have running water?”.

“Well, I don’t know for sure. But I doubt it!” I said with another nervous laugh. “I know we have to buy bottled water to drink.”

The rest of group exchanged frozen grimaces while I let the all-too-familiar feeling that I’d made a social faux par sink in. “I’m also going to miss having nail varnish!” I added hastily, an unwanted note of desperation in my voice.

While the table simmered in collective horror, I suppressed the urge to ask why on earth you would agree to go on such an intense and expensive trip without checking out the shower and loo situation, instead focusing on how best to prevent them resenting me before we’d even touched down. I tried to smooth things over, yet the aftertaste of their initial responses lingered until I touched down in Entebbe, ready to be whisked away to our school.

Welcome to Uganda, folks!

No white saviours

So, let's get this straight, right off the bat. If you're here for a tear-jerking piece about how kids in Uganda have nothing and suffer so much, and for £3 a month you can stop them from starving to death, click away. I don't know about the whole country, but in the neck or the woods I spent my month in I never once saw a child I thought was being neglected, starved, or in any way reminiscent of those ads you get in service station toilets. What I absolutely *did* see was so much love, laughter, ingenuity, determination, and all-around amazing was that it could single-hands sly restore your faith in humanity; a sentiment aided by the fact we had virtually zero access to social media for the majority of the trip! Honestly very refreshing.

The halfway point of the project was marked by a dance party with the kids, complete with specially-made bunting above us. I generally avoided taking photos with the kids, but I was begged to take this specific photo so that I could "show your friends what we look like". Not pictured: us trying and failing to do a dance routine to a Kpop song.

(At one point, someone lamented not having access to the news. I didn't; I can tell you the headlines for free. Israel and Palestine are fighting, people are pissed at the UK government, Russia is up to something. You could get that from any newspaper published post WWII. But I digress.)

We were all given these t-shirts so we could find each other in the airport. I cut and ironed my sponsor's logos to this shirt by hand – I had to redo one four times!

Back on topic, I was asked a lot about my course. When I was signing up for this trip, I was asked repeatedly 'what does this have to do with your degree in cyber security?' And to me, that was kind of the point: it doesn't. At least, not directly. As a computer science student, it's easy to develop a myopic view of the world that goes no

further than the opinions of other computer nerds, typically delivered via Reddit or equally terminally online coursemates. When I saw the stall for Play Action International I became acutely aware of the fact that I'd spent the last four years of my life looking at my computer screen: then rewarding myself by looking at a smaller, more addictive, phone screen. But mistakes in cyber security are made by people, and I've been reliably informed that people exist in real life and not just Microsoft Teams! That's why I went on this trip: to learn more about people in a world far from my own, and, in turn, learn more about myself.

After a single brief conversation at a volunteering fair, I decided to carve a few moments out of my 14 hours of screen time to attend the pitch held by Play Action International; to say I was enamoured would be an understatement. There, I was shown a barrage of images of kids playing, foreign landscapes, safaris, and people looking more carefree than I'd had since GCSEs. Yet there was a hesitant voice in the back of my mind, and I couldn't sign up without fulfilling it. The ideals of white saviour-ism and taking away from the local economy in the long term was something I wanted answers on – and even if that didn't worry me (which it does), my (significantly smarter than me) best friends would be sure to. Luckily, they were more than happy to answer my questions, telling me that the primary recipient of my donations would be workers and supplies in Uganda – my efforts would boost the local economy rather than detracting from it.

With that, my decision was made. I'd never had the opportunity to leave Europe before, and I'm also not the kind of person who likes to spend their holidays lazing by the pool (nothing against those who do, I just have ADHD.) As soon as I left the room, I knew I was signing up, provided I could clear two obstacles: funding, and my parents.

We developed a close relationship with the construction workers throughout the month, beyond what was typical. On the last day, we treated them to have a delicious dinner with us at a sailing club to thank them for their hard work and mentorship.

Asking strangers for money was the easy part. I had to fundraise via Londoner street collection (a more profitable venture than you would think!), contacting local businesses, and asking friends and family to sponsor me running 100k over a few months. On the parental front, I had to spend some hours repeating what I told you above, and scouring the UK government's travel recommendations to prove I wouldn't be kidnapped out there, alongside assurances about the team and charity.

Getting ready for a long day of bucket collection on the Tube. Me and my collection partner (centre, back row) were stationed in Oxford Circus. This day netted me £400 in 12 hours – not bad!

I didn't have any issues applying for funding; however, the webinar had a LOT of information that I struggled to remember all of it.

If I didn't have Turing funding, I wouldn't be writing this, full stop. Although the charity money was fundraised for, I don't have £600 to cover flights, let alone vaccines and visas. I still ended up saving for the best part of a year to pay for my safari and kayaking experiences, but since those were purely leisure activities I thought that was fair enough! Luckily my team usually did well in the BU Dylan's Monday night pub quiz which contributed to the funds!

Even if nobody said it aloud, our feelings as we lay on our (admittedly comfortable) foam slabs, listening to the rain on the tin roof, were unanimous: *what have we gotten ourselves in to?* I was more mentally prepared than most, primed from my time off the grid hiking, but the first time in the long drop toilet isn't something I'll forget. *It changes you,* one group member announced as she returned from her first time.

Us being taken around the Nile on paddleboard hammocks. We jumped in via a rope swing shortly after this photo was taken.

The year 1 classroom converted into the girl's room, featuring a few sleepy volunteers. The mosquito net line is being used for washing due to frequent storms.

Luckily, we had a perfect bridge between the old life and the new. Soft spoken yet assertive, Helga was the best group leader we could have hoped for. Born and raised in nearby Jinja city, on paper Helga was employed by Play Action International and her role was to keep us on schedule and help with culture shock; in reality, she was the big sister we didn't know we needed. Quietly intelligent, she had a knack for always knowing the right things to say, whether it be gently encouraging us in the morning, or comforting members of the group after an emotionally taxing day with the kids. (It goes without saying that's a skill I'm deeply envious of.)

Mother knows best

If their looks of horror were anything to go by, the people in the airport were shocked by the realisation that their next few weeks would not feature a real toilet. Those people were not coached by my mother. This is a woman who researched hoovers so thoroughly I think she knows more about them than Henry himself. Scratch that: I *know* she does. She'd run every possible contingency past me at some point, as well as several impossible ones. I knew to take my malaria medicine, to use my mosquito net, to go to the hospital if I got bitten by a rabid animal. I knew that I wasn't allowed to drink the tap water, and that my showers would be virtually non-existent. I knew that I'd be up at the crack of dawn all day, every day. I knew it all.

Left: the pump from which we took all our cooking, washing, and drinking water. The latter had to be purified before we could drink it. We had to pump three times a day, and those cartons were heavy. Right: our toilet, shared between all the women.

On paper, at least.

On paper, I knew that Uganda didn't value punctuality particularly highly, the charity warning me of 'Uganda Time'. In practice, it seemed that nobody in the entire country was even remotely familiar with the concept of a clock. By week two I had started adding half an hour to every time presented to us, and even that was optimistic. What I initially saw as a flagrant disrespect for my time and effort, I was forced to accept as just a cultural difference – although I grew used to it, I never got used to it. In what I suspect is related news, children of all ages were consistently enamoured by my watch (a well-loved Casio), one of them somehow setting up a daily alarm I am yet to work out how to disable.

On paper, I knew the school would be different to what we have in the UK. I never had the chance to sit in on a lesson, but from what I was told by the children the content was fairly similar to my own primary education (obviously with more focus on Uganda vs. the UK, but the

principles and age-appropriateness were the same.) Payment was mandatory despite this being a state school, and each classroom held 50 children.

Instead of using a ribbon to put around the playground, we held a paper chain making competition. This was my team, holding the (winning) chain!

This school, like the majority schools in Uganda, engaged in the caning of children. Perhaps it should have been expected, given the biblical mindset of sparing the rod, spoil the child, but I wasn't expecting to hear a teacher shouting at the children to get away from some windows or he would cane them. There's a lot of debate about the morals and/or effectiveness of corporal punishment; quite frankly, that discussion is beyond my pay grade. I personally don't believe corporal punishment is morally acceptable or effective in long-term behavioural improvement, but I didn't feel it was my place to comment.

For the most part, the children appeared to be in good health. A far cry from the days of band-aid or hunger marches, I never once saw a person starving. A reasonable number of households kept goats, chickens, or cows for their meat; it was common to walk into town and see a goat tethered by a stake, or chickens running around under your feet. Cats and dogs were also kept, albeit less frequently. On the other end of the spectrum, when we did a horseback safari we were told that the majority of Ugandans had never seen a horse in real life, much less ridden one, making the safari we did a nerve wracking experience for them! (It was for me too, and I don't have the excuse of learning what a horse was half an hour before riding one.)

Being an equatorial country, Uganda's days were the same length all year round – the sun always rose at 6:30am, and set at around 7pm. Occasionally, especially with older children,

people would express envy about our lives in the UK. They'd be jealous of my (alleged) life of luxury, my (alleged) new cars and clothes, my (alleged) massive house, my washing machine (ok, I do have that one). When I tried to dissuade them of these thoughts, I avoided discussion of material possessions, I would then bring up the fact that we only get six hours of sunlight in the winter, and even that isn't at all warming. If that failed, I would have instead bought up the tight-knit communities they had that I feel the UK is lacking. I never needed that second point; the mention of 4pm sunsets in winter worked every time!

The Dreaded Social Skills

The social interaction was *constant*. The children found us endlessly fascinating, the novelty of having *mzungus* living with them never seeming to wear off. You couldn't walk three steps without a child shouting a cheerful greeting or asking what fruits we had access to in the UK. Don't get me wrong, the children were one of the best things about doing this, it was just... so... much. I constantly compared myself to a member of the group who made it look so effortless, despite the fact that she worked with children part-time and it therefore wasn't a fair comparison.

Me playing 'netball' with some of the boarding kids in our free time.

In the few child-free moments we did have, I had the mental battle of interacting with the members of Play Action group without saying or doing anything they deemed unacceptable. I thought I'd be used to it because of numerous aforementioned scout camps, but no amount of mental preparation can overcome an autism diagnosis. I'm an Adult™ now, and I'm expected to act like one.

Much as I typically despise the way people throw around therapy buzzwords, I'm glad that the world overstimulated has entered common parlance, because even in the good moments it truly was the most accurate term for what I was feeling.

Walk Like a Chameleon

Before I departed I was asked by a few people if I'd tried to learn to speak any words in the main language I'd be working in, to which I always told them I'd been studying it my whole life — it's English! In theory, all the kids were taught in English and should therefore be fluent; in practice, proficiency varied wildly, with seemingly no regard for age. Some kids spoke perfect English, keeping up with my quick talking, whereas others needed frequent translation from the first group. The dominant language in Uganda is not English, but Luganda, with numerous additional tribal languages making it impossible for the country to choose an official language. The teachers taught us some words in Luganda. Here is the complete sum of my Luganda

knowledge: Wazizotia. Bulunji. Wibelinyo. Mzungu. That last one means 'white foreigner' but directly translates to a person spinning in a circle, not knowing where they're going. Make of that what you will.

Speaking of spinning in a circle, we were taught a cultural dance that involved constantly moving our hips around while performing, a dance I dubbed the 'washing machine dance'. One person said that the dance seemed very sexual for young children to be doing, due to the dances' emphasis on the hips and rear, most of us felt that was just our western opinions being projected onto certain body parts.

Our outfits for the washing machine dance, featuring real goat pelts.

Over the course of the trip, I was frequently made painfully aware of my aforementioned autism diagnosis. At times it felt as though discussions were a minefield. I had to learn that sometimes I need to keep my opinions to myself – and get better at not always speaking my mind! I've always considered concealing a strongly held opinion a form of lying by omission – but to avoid conflict, sometimes I just had to do that.

The group came to the consensus that it was best to avoid bringing up sensitive topics, although there was disagreement on whether it's ok to engage if the local person brings it up first. Since we were at a Catholic school, Catholic children went for prayers every day, but children of other religions stayed behind. Attending this school were other denominations of Christians, Muslims, and a few students who told me their family practiced indigenous witchcraft. Of course I wanted to know more, so I immediately asked what the hell they meant by that — but

another group member shut my questions down immediately, shouting over me to divert the conversation into plainer waters.

Did she do the right thing? Honestly? I don't know. (Why are you asking me for social advice?!) I thought that it was fair game since they bought up the topic, and the children clearly had no issue with being different religions; on the other hand, I can understand that religious tensions can be very real. And in my campmate's defence, I do tend to talk about these things with all the subtlety of a bloody tribal war.

The topic of projecting western ideals came up while discussing the family life of a staff member. One of the chefs catering for our group revealed that she had her first child at the age of 14, through (an arranged?) marriage. Once we were in the privacy of our camp an disagreement broke out over dinner, with the group splitting into two camps. One camp, spearheaded by me, were of the firm belief that a 14 year old isn't equipped to give birth, much less be a mother, and her parents pushing her to do so in order to enrich themselves with a dowry was morally reprehensible. The other half of the group said that while it would be unacceptable in the UK, Uganda is simply a different culture, and we therefore aren't entitled to comment on it. This debate went on for most of dinner; it was ultimately decided by one person saying that while my camp should respect cultural differences, we don't have to agree with it. (For what it's worth, by all accounts she was an extremely loving and capable mother, and was expecting her third child while working with us!)

Good, Bad, Ugly

Doing face painting for the Year 1 kids.

Us kayaking the source of the Nile, shortly before getting caught in a storm.

Having a casual conversation at the weekend hostel. Note the bungee tower in the background – I jumped off that!

In a sentence I bet you never thought you'd read, having incredibly close lifelong friends I can say anything to, may actually be a disadvantage when in a new group setting. I've had the same best friends for as long as I can remember. Then, when it came time to separate for uni, I had a decent degree of freedom over whom I chose to socialise with. People in my societies share at least one interest with me by nature of what a society is, and I think the screening process for cyber security involves checking that your social skills are at least a bit below par. You'd do well on Big Brother? Sorry, you're out. Maybe study marketing next time.

The point is, I felt I had a hard time getting everyone in the group to like me. I like to think that most people would struggle to befriend 8 random people while thrown into a crazy scenario, but I can't imagine my inability to read social cues *helped*. I've always felt like there was a layer of clingfilm between me and neurotypicals; I can see what they want me to say, they can see me for who I am, but there's a barrier between the two that I can neither see nor comprehend. From my perspective, the social rules changed based on what's for dinner that night, your shoe size, and the phases of the moon. What would one day be a well-received joke would the next day be so unforgivably rude the group shouted at me over it. All things considered, I think the most of the group liked, or at least tolerated, me.

Enjoying the company of some Southern white rhinos.

But — in true autistic fashion — I have absolutely no way of knowing if any of this is true. It's difficult to know how to ask these things and I'm told my neurotypical friends that it would be difficult to answer.

Finally, onto the highlights: safari and, wait for it…draughts. A highlight I'd established going into the trip was the safari. Going on an African Safari was a bucket list item for me or as long as I can remember, so I was over the moon upon entering Murchison Falls. We spent two days doing game drives all over the park, seeing four of the big five in their natural habitat. I desperately wanted to see an elephant, so I was delighted when a whole herd of them blocked our road – so happy I didn't think to take any pictures.

On safari!

Our playground included two tables, one of which was dedicated to a chessboard. On opening day, I decided to teach some of the quieter boys how to play draughts, using smaller, muddier stones as my game pieces so they could have the cleaner ones. The boys seemed only mildly interested, but stuck around to play regardless, and I went away wondering if I'd wasted my time. When I returned sometime later, I was immediately accosted by a dozen or so boys, demanding I accept their challenge to a draughts tournament. It went on for what felt like hours, endless matches of me vs. a rotating cast of teenage boys, coached by an increasingly large crowd of onlookers. Initially I tried to make the game fairly evenly matched, pointing out moves they could take and knowingly sacrificing my pieces; by the end, this was wholly unnecessary due to some older boys becoming straight up better than me. Student becomes teacher, indeed.

The chessboard. There's a sister ludo board right next to it.

Our group left the school the next day with much fanfare, enough tears being spilt to fill Lake Victoria. Teachers cried, kids cried, our group cried. Everyone cried, except two groups: the draughts boys, and me. The draughts boys were happy to give our bus a quick wave before returning to the table, too invested in whatever game was happening to get wrapped up in the melodrama. I was happy to return that wave, fulfilled with leaving a legacy beyond the physical.

Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened.

And on that remarkably sappy note, I will leave you. Here are some pictures of the playground, and I hope you enjoyed reading!!

Final note: since my return I’ve enjoyed sharing photos and tales of my trip with my family. As well as being delighted about the unique experiences I had, they were struck by how difficult the manual labour part looked – it’s true that we worked hard digging, cleaning, sanding every weekday morning but in the moment it felt empowering and purposeful, even though our muscles felt it in the days that followed.